Mirrors and Windows: The Importance of Diverse Literature

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Ariel Harrison

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Diane Bottomley

Signed _____

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Abstract

Imagine children attending school every day without the ability to see themselves represented, as if they do not exist. Unfortunately, this is a reality for many students in the United States. Their language, race, religion, family structure, disability, socioeconomic status, and culture are not visible within the walls of the classroom. What kind of message does this send America's youth? In a nation that grows more diverse each year, the literature educators select must accurately reflect all children. While educators incorporate books showing different cultures, races, and languages, many fail to address family structure. Families in the United States are changing. They are becoming more diverse each year. Unfortunately, children's literature is not keeping up with this shift. Teachers, parents, and community members must seek out books representing various family types to include in their libraries.

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Introduction

Families in the United States are evolving. The nuclear family, while still present, no longer represents every child. More and more children are raised by single parents, grandparents, and adoptive parents. Due to the prevalence of divorce, blended families including stepparents and stepsiblings are common. Unfortunately, children's literature does not reflect this shift in family structure. Locating books that authentically portray all family types can be a daunting task because of their scarcity. The fact that this faction of diversity is frequently overlooked within teacher preparation courses exacerbates the issue. In a nation that grows more diverse each year, it is the responsibility of educators to select and teach with literature that accurately depicts all Americans. To truly engage in learning, children must feel included, appreciated, and empowered. Teachers accomplish this by creating a caring classroom culture and ensuring that all students are valued members of the community. When children are represented in literature, they connect with the characters on a different level; they feel important. All students have the right to experience this while reading. To provide these powerful learning opportunities, educators need to expand their libraries to include diverse families. The family unit is such an essential component of life, yet these books remain neglected. To aid educators, parents, and community members on their journey to fully represent all children, this paper provides information concerning different family structures, a detailed list of appropriate literature, strategies to incorporate these books, and guidelines to evaluate the quality of future texts.

Family Structures

Single-Parent Households

Families in the United States are becoming more diverse. Although the majority of children (64 percent) lived with two married parents in 2012, this family structure is less prominent compared to a decade ago "when 69 percent of children lived with two married parents" (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, p. 21-23). Educators must be aware of this shift as they prepare their inclusive classroom libraries; not every student will live with a mother and father. In fact, "approximately 21 million children—or about 28 percent of children in the United States—lived with one parent in 2012" (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, p. 23). Of these students "around 18 million (24 percent) children lived with a single female reference parent, while 2.6 million (4 percent) were living with a single male reference parent" (Laughlin, 2014, p. 1). The United States' government recognized the significance of family diversity by including a household relationship question in the 2010 Census. The 2010 Census Briefs stated "the relationship question measures the changing composition of families and households in the United States and provides essential information" (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012, p. 21). This data will be used to plan and implement federal programs intended to aid families and children. Just as the government is aware of changing family structures, educators must be responsive to the needs of their students.

Teachers can lend support by creating a comprehensive classroom library that portray all children. Being mindful of these statistics allows educators to accurately depict their students' families through literature and discuss family diversity. As educators build their libraries and plan their unit, they will likely notice that books containing single mothers are available while books concerning single fathers are scarce. Although this representation of literature matches the population, teachers must strive to incorporate a variety of books that address as many family types as possible. *Love Is a Family,* by Roma Downey, provides an excellent overview of family

diversity while focusing on the main character, Lily, who lives with her mother. Lily worries that everyone will laugh when she only brings one person to the school "Family Night." This book explores fears concerning peer acceptance through the eyes of a child; as the book introduces other families, the common theme of family love remains apparent. If teachers struggle locating books about single fathers, they can shift their search to include books where the main characters spend quality time with their fathers. This will allow educators to make the connection to single-father households through literature. For example, *In the Tree House*, written by Andrew Larsen, describes the special relationship between a father and his two sons as they plan and build a tree house together. By including a variety of books in the family unit, educators provide both mirrors and windows for students.

Blended Families

Children's living arrangements can be altered through divorce, separation, or the blending of new families. Although living with two biological parents remains the majority, changes in family structure represent many children. In fact, "in 2009, 5.6 million children lived with at least one stepparent" (Kreider & Ellis, 2011, p. 6). Of the 50.8 million children living with two parents, "87 percent (44.5 million) lived with their biological mother and biological father. An additional 10 percent (5.3 million) lived with a biological parent and a stepparent, usually with a biological mother and a stepfather (4.1 million)" (Kreider & Ellis, 2011, p. 7). Sharing time, attention, and memories with siblings is an important aspect of growing up for most children. About 78 percent of children live with at least one sibling (Kreider & Ellis, 2011, p. 13). As parents divorce and form families, some children gain brothers and sisters. This is true for "11 percent of all children who lived with at least one half sibling, 2 percent with at least one stepsibling, and another 2 percent with at least one adopted sibling" (Kreider & Ellis, 2011,

p. 14). This family structure is becoming more prevalent because 16 percent (11.7 million) of children live in blended families (Kreider & Ellis, 2011, p. 17). When teachers maintain a current understanding of family structures, they provide a more representative and equitable education

Due to the prevalence of divorce in the United States, educators should plan to include high quality children's literature concerning this topic in their family unit. Teachers must carefully select literature that addresses this subject with sensitivity and developmentally appropriate language. *Fred Stays with Me!* is one well-written example. The author, Nancy Coffelt, honestly describes the effects of divorce through a child's eyes. Coffelt evokes a sense of comfort as the main character's dog, named Fred, moves between the two homes with her; Fred is the young girl's constant during an uncertain time. *Emily's Blue Period*, by Cathleen Daly, uses the art of Pablo Picasso to explain the emotions of living in two homes. At first Emily is in her Blue Period because she is very sad like Picasso. Eventually, she is introduced to collages, another artform of Picasso. Emily uses a collage to express her understanding that home is in her heart, not where she lives. After parents divorce, some will remarry; because of this, educators should include stepparents and stepsiblings in their family unit. In the book *My Mom's Wedding,* Eve Bunting's reassuring words address the concerns and emotions often felt by children when their parents remarry. The main character, Pinky is asked to be the ringbearer in her mother's wedding. She is conflicted; Pinky is excited for her mother and she loves her stepfather, but she does not want to hurt her father. By the end of the story, Pinky realizes that she can love both of her fathers. *Oh, Brother!*, by Nikki Grimes, uses twenty poems to describe the journey, struggles, and eventual acceptance of one blended family. Xavier never wanted a brother, especially not someone like perfect Chris who could steal his Mami from him. After

many disagreements between the brothers, Xavier finally learns that family can come in many different forms. Because divorce and stepfamilies are a growing aspect of family diversity, educators should include titles such as these in their family unit.

Families who Adopt

Census 2000 acted as the first decennial census to collect data concerning the category of relationship between the householder and their child. This census included a question to determine if children were biological, step, or adopted. The American Community Survey (ACS) included the same relationship types in 2008. In 2007, the Current Population Survey (CPS) expanded this question by asking residents to "identify both a coresident mother and father, as well as asking the type of relationship between the child and their parents" (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014, p. 4). These updated questions allowed these organizations to gather data pertinent to the ever-changing American family. "In 2010, of the 64.8 million children under 18, 93 percent were the biological children of the householder, 4 percent were stepchildren, and 2 percent were adopted children" (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014, p. 4). This information allows educators to more fully understand their students' living situations. According to the 2010 Census data, approximately 1.5 million children under the age of 18 were adopted. Teachers aware of this fact will likely incorporate more culturally responsive pedagogy; their activities will also be more inclusive and sensitive.

When planning the family unit, it is helpful for educators to know that according to the National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP), about 25 percent of adopted children were adopted internationally. It is also significant to note that according to 2007 NSAP, "40 percent of adopted children (not including those adopted by their stepparents) were involved in a trasracial, transethnic, or transcultural adoption" (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014, p. 26). This

information concerning adoption and specific subgroups of adoption allow teachers to see that while the majority of children are biologically connected to their family, many others are adopted. Because of this, teachers must address the topic of adoption through high quality children's literature, sensitive language, and developmentally appropriate activities. *We Belong Together: A Book About Adoption and Families,* written by Todd Parr, provides educators with one example developmentally appropriate for younger grades. Parr uses child-friendly language and illustrations to explain this complex concept. *Three Names of Me,* by Mary Cummings, is geared towards middle to upper elementary school; this book addresses international adoption. The main character Ada explores her identity by discussing the importance of her three names: her name from the orphanage, from her birth mother, and from her American family. The story encourages children to fully embrace their adoption story. By reading books about adoption, educators promote acceptance of differences.

Children Living with Grandparents

"In 2012, according to the CPS, about 4.2 million households contained both grandchildren under 18 and their grandparents—this was about 3 percent of all households and about 10 percent of all children" (Ellis & Simmons, 2014, p. 2). Of these households, approximately 2.7 million grandparents acted as "grandparent caregivers," meaning they maintained primary responsibility for grandchildren under the age of 18 living with them. Historically, grandchildren visited grandparents during holidays and extended breaks, but throughout the 1990s and 2000s, these relationships were based on parental divorce, financial struggles, and necessary childcare. In 1970, around 3 percent of children lived in grandparent-maintained households; by 2012, this number doubled to approximately 6 percent (Ellis & Simmons, 2014, p. 3). The American family is evolving. Societal shifts such as increased life

expectancy, single parent families, female employment, divorce rates, teen pregnancy, drug usage, and incarceration affect the involvement and responsibility of grandparents in modern families. In fact, in "2010, more people were 65 or older than in any previous census" (Ellis & Simmons, 2014, p. 2). All of these trends emphasize the significance of multigenerational households. Parents facing financial difficulties often turn to other family members for support; these situations increase the likelihood that children live with grandparents.

Children's literature must reflect these changes. Grandparents are becoming more immediately involved in their grandchildren's lives; some even take on the duties of parents. Because of this, teachers should discuss grandparents and other extended family members in their unit of study. Although it is difficult to find books in which the main character lives with his or her grandparents, educators should include books that portray the importance of grandparents and other family members. Teachers can accomplish this by searching for books with main characters who spend quality time with their grandparents or extended family. *My Grandparents Are Special*, written by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos, provides one example of this. While the little boy does not live with his grandmother and grandfather, he understands and discusses their importance in his family. In *Sugarbush Spring* the little girl describes her annual tradition of creating syrup from sap with her grandfather. This beautifully written and illustrated book highlights the importance of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives. *Smack Dab in the Middle* follows the journey of Rosie Roselli who happens to fall in between a mother, father, sister, brother, grandma, grandpa, nonna, nonno, four aunts, four uncles, and twelve cousins. Initially Rosie feels lost in a sea of relatives, but she eventually realizes that her family always loves her and celebrates her accomplishments. Although these examples do not explicitly

portray a character living with his or her grandparents, they do emphasize the importance of extended family members.

Families with Two Mothers or Two Fathers

Although the topic of same-sex parents is often controversial in schools, teachers must remain educated concerning all family structures. Due to the growing prevalence of this family type, teachers are more likely to have students with two mother or two fathers than they were in the past. The Williams Institute analyzed data from the General Social Survey of 2008 and 2011, the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey of 2012, the Census 2010, and the 2011 American Community Survey. Through these four sources, the organization described important statistics about this section of family diversity. For example, "estimates from Census 2010 suggest that there are nearly 650,000 same-sex couples living in the US" (Gates, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, "data from the 2011 ACS show that an estimated 19% of same-sex couple households include children under 18. This is true for 27% of female couples and nearly 11% of male couples" (Gates, 2013, p. 2). Across the United States there are around 125,000 same-sex couples parenting roughly 220,000 children. This means that about 3 in one thousand children (0.3%) in the United States live with two mothers or two fathers (Gates, 2013, p. 3). It is also significant to note that same-sex parents are four times more likely than different-sex parents to raise an adopted child and six times more likely to raise a foster child (Gates, 2013, p. 1). While these statistics may appear low in comparison to opposite-sex parents, these numbers have the potential to increase more noticeably in the near future due to the recent Supreme Court ruling.

With the constant societal and family changes occurring in the United States, educators must be prepared to discuss this topic and address student questions. They should prepare by reading quality children's literature concerning same-sex parents. This will provide teachers

with developmentally appropriate and sensitive responses to student concerns, questions, and discussions. Due to the inherent controversial nature of this topic, teachers should gain the support of their administrators and parents before reading these books. The goal of this unit is for all students to feel respected and represented; no one family type should be expressed as more valuable or more "right" than another. Teachers should convey this sentiment when talking with administrators, parents, students, and fellow educators. When teaching about this family structure, educators should select literature that reinforces their theme and definition of family. *Mommy, Mama, and Me*, written by Leslea Newman, is appropriate for primary grades. This beautifully illustrated book uses simple rhymes to follow a little girl's day as it describes the role of her mommy and mama. *Mommy, Mama, and Me* reinforces the idea that although all families are different, they all love each other. *A Tale of Two Daddies* follows a similar pattern. The main character, explains to her friend Lincoln that each of her dads has a unique role in her life, but they both love her. Both of these examples portray diverse families while emphasizing the special bond that children develop with their family members.

Family Challenges

Families across the United States face challenges every day such as illness, homelessness, food insecurity, immigration, poverty, and job loss. Teachers must maintain a current understanding of challenges affecting families today; these issues probably impact more students than educators anticipate. For example, in 2011 "twenty-two percent (16.6 million) of children lived in families with incomes that fell below poverty" (Laughlin, 2014, p. 2). In the same year, nearly "two-thirds (65 percent) of children lived in households that participated in at least one of more of the following government aid programs: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental

Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Medicaid; and the National School Lunch Program" (Laughlin, 2014, p. 2). Many families struggled because of the last economic recession. During this time period, "homeownership among households with their own children under the age of 18 fell by 15 percent. These households saw a 33 percent increase in parental unemployment" (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, p. 2). Shifts in family dynamics also affect many American children. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) collected data from May 2008 until November 2013 to study these family transitions; it noted family structure transitions, employment transitions, and residential transitions. The SIPP explained that "18 percent of children experience at least one exit or entrance of a parent or a parent's cohabiting partner between 2008 and 2011" (Laughlin, 2014, p. 12). It also found that "almost one in three children moved at least once between 2008 and 2011" (Laughlin, 2014, p. 13). During this same time frame, "thirty-two percent of children had at least one parent or guardian who had an employment change" (Laughlin, 2014, p. 13). All of these changes affect a student's ability to focus and learn in school.

Despite various difficulties, these families display resilience, compassion, and positivity. It is a teacher's responsibility to not only represent and value these families, but to also provide a safe and educational environment where students share their concerns, questions, and personal connections. Educators accomplish this by using high quality children's literature to teach about these challenges. By providing these learning opportunities, teachers help students develop empathy towards their peers. Teachers can select developmentally appropriate books to address difficult topics such as homelessness, refugees, moving, incarceration, sibling rivalry, and illness. Educators may choose books based on their students' family situations. For example, if there are several new students in a classroom *Rosa's Room,* by Barbara Bottner, and

Yard Sale, by Eve Bunting, may be beneficial for students. These titles will allow the children to connect to the emotions the characters feel as they leave friends behind and sell their belongings. *Fly Away Home*, by Eve Bunting, and *A Shelter in Our Car,* by Monica Gunning both provide an emotional account of homelessness from a child's perspective. Although these books may not be developmentally appropriate for primary grades, they encourage students to think about a challenge from another person's point of view. With beautiful language and illustrations, *Knock knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* by Daniel Beaty, describes the absence of a father through the eyes of a child. Beaty paints a picture of hope for the little boy despite his father's incarceration; the author does not explicitly discuss the topic of incarceration, but this is explained in his author's note. Families overcome a variety of challenges; the purpose of this section is to acknowledge and celebrate their resilience through children's literature.

Guidelines for Selecting Literature

While the list of high quality literature included in this paper represents a wide variety of family structures, it is not exhaustive. This list provides educators with a foundation from which to build as they develop their classroom libraries. It is a teacher's responsibility to meet the needs of their students. They may select specific titles based upon their topic and decide to supplement their lessons with books not found on this list. As more and more children's books are published each year, parents, educators, and community members must have the knowledge to recognize high quality literature when they see it. Although the guidelines described below are tailored to aid educators in selecting high quality children's literature portraying diverse families, these suggestions can also be generalized when searching for other high quality children's books.

Teachers may begin their search by exploring books that received the Randolph Caldecott Medal, the John Newbery Medal, or the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award. These award-winning books provide educators with a solid starting point. Teachers will be certain of these books' quality because of the vetting process, high expectations, and prestige of the award. The American Library Association acts as a plentiful resource for educators expanding their library by providing lists of winning titles and information about specific awards. This can help teachers sift through specific topics and narrow their search. The list of Notable Children's Books available on the American Library Association's website is especially helpful because it not only identifies the best children's books of the year, it includes Newbery, Caldecott, Belpre, Sibert, Geisel, and Batchelder Award and Honor books. Notable Children's Books, which received the Coretta Scott King Award, Michael L. Printz Award, or the Schneider Family Book Award are also denoted. Due to the comprehensiveness of this resource, it was frequently consulted while compiling the list of quality literature portraying diverse families.

Although searching through these lists is a significant first step toward building an inclusive library, teachers should not discount a book simply because it did not win an accolade. As professionals, teachers must use their training, best judgement, and these suggestions to determine if a book should be added to their classroom library. The following guidelines focus mainly on evaluating non-award winning books for quality. First, teachers should read the entire book; they should never skim. Every detail is important. This includes the illustrations and the text. From here educators can determine the theme of the book. Quality literature reinforces the main idea teachers want their students to gain from reading. After reading the book once, teachers must ensure that the literature is free of stereotypes. Due to the subtle nature of some stereotypes, teachers may revisit the text and illustrations again, searching

through details. They should pay particular attention to how adoption, divorce, and family struggles such as children living poverty are described. The purpose of reading and teaching with these books is to educate children about diverse families. High quality literature eliminates misconceptions rather than perpetuates them. By selecting books that portray diverse families in a positive manner, without stereotyping, teachers can encourage their students to understand and accept all families.

As teachers search for books free of stereotypes, they must also promote and teach with books that use sensitive language. These books carefully address delicate topics such as adoption, divorce, and family struggles. They discuss family differences in a manner that does not represent one family as "better" than another. These books also promote the comforting thread of similarities present in all families. For example, all families love each other; all families support each other during difficult times; all families celebrate accomplishments together. When selecting books concerning adoption, educators should avoid books that use insensitive language such as "adoptive mother," "like a mother," "have a child of their own," "give up for adoption," and "abandoned." Instead, teachers should include books that use sensitive language such as "child who was adopted," "birth mother," "biological father," and "birth parent was unable to parent" (Meese, 2012, p. 134). Teachers should model and encourage students to use this positive language when reading about and discussing adoption. These words allow children to break through misconceptions and better understand peers who may be adopted.

When selecting books concerning divorce, teachers must ensure that the author includes sensitive language. For example, these books should emphasize the love that both parents still feel and show towards their child despite the divorce. They should also help children understand

that divorce happens in many households around the country; they are not alone. These books should emphasize that a divorce is never a child's fault. While it may be beneficial for students to explore the character's feelings, they should end the discussion with a feeling of clarity rather than discomfort. The language the teacher uses while reading and teaching with these books, should mirror that of the author. By using high quality literature, educators can successfully address a difficult issue occurring in many households. When teachers provide safe opportunities for these students to see their family situation represented in literature, they are empowered to engage in conversations that seek understanding, strength, and support.

Families in the United States face challenges every day. Educators must recognize that issues occurring outside of school are not isolated; school doors do not bar these challenges. Rather than pretending these struggles do not exist, teachers should acknowledge them and educate their students in an attempt to eliminate stereotypes and misconceptions. To accomplish this, teachers must select appropriate literature that addresses these challenges using sensitive language. Educators should check the text for a note from the author; this may provide the teacher with necessary background information supporting the significance of the issue. For example, *A Shelter in Our Car* by Monica Gunning and *My Name is Sangoel* by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed both contain an author's note with data concerning homelessness and refugees. Teachers should also examine the honesty with which the author tells the story; the quality and reliability of the work increases if the author personally experienced this struggle or used research to provide a detailed and realistic account. Khadra Mohammed, who coauthored *My Name is Sangoel*, is the executive director of the Pittsburgh Refugee Center; this information, along with the author's note, allows educators to deem this a high quality book. Additionally, these books should not blame the characters for the difficulties

they face; this negative perspective reinforces stereotypes. Ultimately, high quality literature portrays the family as resilient despite the challenge present in their lives.

As educators choose high quality children's literature portraying diverse families, they should consider their students' social and emotional development. Teachers must be cautious when selecting books for this unit. They should avoid singling out one particular student. This can be accomplished by framing the unit as an opportunity for all students to see themselves represented while learning about many different families. The books included in the classroom library and the family unit of study should be developmentally appropriate. This aspect of the selection process is particularly important for books addressing sensitive topics such as divorce, adoption, and family challenges. For instance, a student whose parents recently divorced may feel uncomfortable with a book focusing on this family structure; teachers must be aware of these situations to determine what topics should be included in the unit. Alternatively, some students whose parents divorced may benefit from these books because they provide an opportunity to discuss the character's feelings and actions. Teachers need to understand their students' emotional development to build a unit that best meets their needs.

Educators must also consider this guideline when examining books concerning adoption. Students in primary grades may not understand the concept of adoption; in this case educators must select literature written on their developmental level. Other students may need teachers to clear up misconceptions concerning adoption; in these situations, literature acts as a valuable resource to spark a conversation and provide accurate information. If teachers know a student in their class is adopted, they should communicate with the child's parents before planning this portion of the unit. During this conversation, educators should ask for book

suggestions, specific language that should be used, and other advice. The purpose of reading these books is not to draw attention to the student who is adopted, but to represent all children.

As teachers select books addressing family challenges, they must be mindful of their students' social and emotional development. For example, the homelessness described in *A Shelter in Our Car* by Monica Gunning may be too intense or emotional for younger students. *My Name is Sangoel* by Karen Williams and Khadra Mohammed discusses the life of a refugee. Although this book addresses another difficult topic, it is written in a way that makes it developmentally appropriate for younger students. While both of these books portray families handling difficult situations, the authors write at different development levels. Teachers must be aware of their students' background, the author's word choice, and the illustrator's details when approving books for this unit.

The purpose of this unit is to provide students with an opportunity to see themselves in high quality literature. Books representing different cultures are expected to be accurate and free of stereotypes; this same expectation is required of books representing different family structures. Just as the activities educators plan relate to students on a personal level, the stories teachers read should feel authentic. Both the text and illustrations must accurately reflect the lives of students. To determine the quality of a book in this regard, educators should consider the actions, emotions, and situations present in a story. All three of these components should realistically reflect students' lives. High quality literature allows students to safely discuss sensitive situations by connecting to the character's journey; this is particularly true for books concerning adoption, divorce, and family struggles because of the strong emotions children often feel. Authors of quality books honestly explore these topics on a child-friend level so all students have an opportunity to see themselves positively represented in literature. Although the

intention of the unit is to explore multiple family types, this goal is not mutually exclusive. Ideally, high quality books should also portray family diversity in other ways. For example, students should see families speaking different languages at home, families practicing cultural traditions, and families made up of multiple races. As the family unit changes, teachers must select literature that authentically depicts all children's lives.

As educators outline their family unit, develop authentic activities, and sift through lists of books, they must remain intentional when selecting the titles they plan to include in their lessons. The books teachers read during the literacy block are the backbone of the lessons; these read alouds act as shared experiences for the students. Student-centered discussions, follow-up questions, hands-on activities, and written responses stem from these learning opportunities. Because students need to see themselves in literature, teachers should select books so a variety of family structures are visible. This includes single-mother households, single-father households, two-parent households, children who are adopted, children who live with extended family, children with divorced parents, children with stepparents and stepsiblings, and children living in poverty. While teachers should select a wide range of books, they should also tailor their collection to mirror the specific characteristics of their students. For example, teachers may choose books about refugees, moving, or welcoming a baby sister. Because teachers are limited in the number of read alouds they can incorporate, they must maximize student exposure to various family types. To accomplish this, educators should ensure that each read aloud features a different family structure. They should also check out multiple copies of each book. Before morning meeting, students could read these family books silently; the teacher would rotate these containers of books daily. Educators create an inclusive learning environment by valuing and representing all students.

As educators expand their library, they should search for high quality literature that depicts family diversity both explicitly and implicitly. Explicit books directly discuss family differences while implicit books subtly address family structures. The list included in this paper denotes both explicit and implicit examples. Educators should include explicit books as read alouds during the family unit because they spark conversations and questions concerning families. After teachers conclude these lessons, explicit books should remain available in the classroom library for students to reread and feel represented. In the following weeks, teachers should stock their library with implicit books. These books are just as significant as explicit books because of their authenticity. These stories are vital because they portray realistic families that mirror the lives of students today. For example, rather than the "token" adopted character, students read about a brave character constantly going on adventures that is also adopted. While being adopted is an important aspect of the character's life, it is not the basis of the plot. Rather than discussing how some parents divorce, an implicit book focuses on the eventful and humorous life of a daughter and her single mother. In these examples, the characters reflect today's families; these stories connect with students on a personal level because they are realistic. While implicit books can be more difficult to seek out, they should appear during other units of study. This ensures that all students feel valued and represented in high quality literature. Explicit and implicit books provide students with both mirrors and windows.

When selecting high quality literature for this unit, teachers should remember the importance of family support at home. Teachers should reach out to families before beginning this study for several reasons. First, communication is an essential piece of creating a cohesive education both at home and at school. Families should know what their children are learning and teachers should know what families are reinforcing. Second, families are a valuable

resource. Teachers must remember that parents and other family member's are the child's first educators. They know their child best. Teachers should take advantage of this by asking for their expertise. Third, teachers must use this knowledge to engage with families. Educators could begin the unit by sending home a newsletter explaining what students will be discussing over the next few weeks. They should outline topics of conversation, potential book lists, and related activities that will require family participation. Teachers should end by asking families for their support and suggestions. Families experiencing major changes or challenges may have compiled a collection of books addressing these sensitive topics. Teachers can engage families by asking them to share their findings. This simple conversation allows educators to really understand the needs present in their classrooms. By engaging family members, teachers might learn that their students need books discussing divorce, adoption, moving, a new baby, homelessness, or stepparents.

Teaching Strategies

Literature portraying diverse perspectives is valuable both for students and for educators. This specific type of literature provides students with an opportunity to develop empathy. By incorporating these books, teachers equip students with mirrors to see themselves and windows to better understand, respect, and accept their peers. As educators select and include literature representing different families, they will learn and grow as professionals. Planning and implementing this family unit encourages teachers to maintain a current understanding of families, research new teaching strategies, locate quality books that accurately describes their students, and reflect after lessons for continued growth. A list of high quality children's literature aids teachers in the expansion of their library, but it does not assist with planning and teaching using diverse literature. An interactive read aloud lesson template is

included in Appendix A and a guided reading lesson template is included in Appendix B. These guidelines along with the strategies described below are designed to help educators effectively plan lessons that incorporate books depicting diverse families.

First and foremost, teachers must develop a caring and curious environment. While this classroom culture is necessary for any true learning, it is vital to successfully implement these lessons. Teachers should begin by establishing clear expectations for discussions. Students should actively participate; their role includes thinking, asking questions, responding to peers' comments, and adding to the conversation. Students should use respectful language during the discussion even when they disagree. Teachers can help students understand the procedures for classroom discourse through modeling and think alouds. When students feel supported, they are much more likely to share their thoughts or personal experiences. Sensitive topics such as family challenges, divorce, and adoption may be difficult to discuss initially, but students will likely open up in encouraging classrooms. Throughout these lessons, the students should be driving the conversation. Teachers should act as guides by asking probing questions that encourage students to think more deeply and further develop their understanding of families.

For lessons concerning family diversity to be successful, students must participate in authentic activities. Fortunately, the books included on the list allow teachers to easily connect to both their students and their standards. These books reach students on a personal level throughout the unit of study because they see themselves in the literature. Within these lessons, the teacher should include learning experiences that relate to students. For example, students might brainstorm different types of families. They could compare and contrast their family with others depicted in the books. These books also lend themselves to comprehension skills such as retelling, summarizing, finding themes, and visualizing. Teachers can introduce vocabulary

within the context of the literature, making it more meaningful. Even phonics instruction can be connected in relevant ways by counting the syllables in family words or discussing word families. Teachers incorporate writing by examining the different forms of communication represented in the books. For example, *Dear Primo: A letter to my Cousin* is written in letters. *What's up with Bridget's mom?: Medikidz Explain Breast Cancer* uses a graphic novel to discuss a sensitive topic. *Inside Out and Back Again, Emma Dilemma,* and *Oh, Brother!* all convey the story through poetry. Teachers could use these books as an opportunity to study a variety of genres. They can also encourage students to practice writing in these styles in response to reading.

The literature included on this list provides students with mirrors to see themselves, but more importantly, with windows to learn about others. While some underrepresented students desperately need to see themselves in books, it is also valuable to frame activities as a way to understand other families. By completing a unit of study about different families, students have the opportunity to see themselves and investigate other family types. Throughout these lessons, students broaden their awareness of families. Before diving into this unit of family diversity, teachers should activate students' background knowledge and determine what students already understand about families. This can be accomplished through a schema chart, an illustration, a definition, a sticky note list, a mind map, or a think-pair-share. This crucial step will aid in the planning process and book selection. For example, if teachers notice misconceptions about topics such as adoption or stepfamilies they may include these books in future lesson. During this time, teachers build from students' experiences.

Over the next few days, educators should intertwine these books, comprehension skills, writing opportunities, and potentially other disciplines, if it is appropriate. Additionally, teachers

introduce literature and prepare activities that encourage students to realize that while families are unique, several common threads exist across all families. Teachers may point out that all families love each other, need each other, and support each other; they help their loved ones through difficult times and celebrate during special occasions. Students can use various compare and contrast organizers to visually represent the similarities and differences of families. To highlight similarities at any grade level, teachers can prompt students to create a definition of family. Younger students may list responses to "All families…" while older students construct a page out of a dictionary. Upper elementary teachers can also emphasize similarities by challenging students to describe and justify the theme of the book. To conclude this unit, teachers may ask each student to create one page for a classroom book. On their page, students can write about or draw their family. They may include details that make their family unique such as traditions or celebrations. Students could also explain what family means to them. This culminating activity will produce a classroom book that represents everyone's family. Students will feel empowered and proud of their contribution and this book will likely become a classroom favorite during independent reading time. Reading about, discussing, and exploring family diversity through authentic lessons will develop a sense of understanding and acceptance.

Assignments throughout this unit should be inclusive and sensitive. While an educator would never intentionally exclude students, they may not realize the sensitivity required to implement these lessons. For example, a family tree seems like a logical activity for students to complete, but children who were adopted may feel anxious about this assignment. They may not know about their family history or they may feel confused about representing their biological family. Other students may live in single-parent households and have no connection to the other

parent. These students may feel conflicted about including them in a family tree. Teachers can avoid these issues by asking students to create a family quilt rather than a family tree. Students are encouraged to draw and write about their family members. They may also illustrate their quilt with images or words that describe their family; this may include traditions, food, culture, or special activities they do with their family. After students finish their quilts, teachers should encourage them to share with the class. This provides students with another opportunity to search for similarities in all families.

While text-to-self connections harmonize well with these books, teachers should avoid asking students to "Think of a time your mom comforted you when you were scared and write about it in your notebook." Students should still make and write about text-to-self connections, but teachers should not focus on one particular family member. Because students come from different situations they may not be able to respond to questions about a mom, sibling, or grandparent. For example, students may only live with their father, they may be an only child, or their grandparents may live in another country. Teachers should provide an encompassing prompt to value all students' experiences. They could revise the earlier activity to say, "Think of a time your family comforted you when you were scared and write about it in your notebook." This allows all students to participate in the activity.

Educators may be inclined to ask students to create timeline of their life to get to know them and their family. Teachers must be careful with this activity. Students who are adopted, students living in foster care, or students who move frequently may not know or wish to share details from each year of their life. Teachers may modify this activity so students select a favorite year or several significant life events. This slight adjustment includes every

student. Additionally, by incorporating student choice in the assignment, they will be more likely to remain engaged.

Throughout this unit, teachers may wish to assign larger projects, which require parent involvement. Although educators often assign these activities as a means to connect school learning to home, they should continue to be inclusive and sensitive. Teachers must remember that some families speak different languages, some families struggle financially, and some include single parents who work multiple jobs. All of these differences must be accommodated so students can fully participate in these learning opportunities. To accomplish this, educators provide at least one week's notice; this allows families to arrange a time in their busy schedules to work on the activity together. Teachers should send home the supplies required to complete the assignment; this alleviates unnecessary stress so families can focus on the purpose project rather than the financial burden. The project description and instruction sheet should be translated into the proper language so everyone can understand and finish the activity. To engage all families and students, teachers should provide them with the tools they need to be successful.

After exploring a variety of books, learning about different families, and discovering common threads, students will better understand, appreciate, and accept not only their peers, but fellow citizens as they grow into adulthood. Students develop empathy through the use of high quality children's literature, authentic activities, and thought-provoking discussions described in these teaching strategies. These critical thinking skills, writing skills, and communication skills translate across multiple subjects and grade levels. When students connect to content on a personal level and create their own meaning, they remember learning experiences much longer than the duration of the lesson.

Conclusion

Society, culture, and beliefs in the United States are changing. These shifts affect the definition of family. Although the nuclear family remains the majority, its presence decreased compared to several decades ago; this family type no longer represents all children. Single parents, grandparents, and adoptive parents are increasingly important in child rearing. As more couples with children divorce and remarry, blended families including stepparents and stepsiblings become a significant aspect of family life. Unfortunately, children's literature does not mirror this trend in family dynamics. Locating books that authentically depict all family structures can be challenging due to their scarcity. The fact that teacher preparation courses often neglect this facet of diversity intensifies the problem. In a country that becomes more diverse each year, educators must take on the responsibility of locating and teaching with high quality children's literature that accurately portrays all students. This is a vital step towards equitable education. To fully engage in the learning process, children must feel safe, represented, and empowered. Teachers fulfill this need by building a caring classroom culture and ensuring that all students are respected members of the learning community. When children see themselves in literature, they connect with the characters and themes on a deeper level. All students deserve to experience this during reading. To nurture these powerful learning opportunities, educators must continually cultivate their classroom libraries to be representative of all students; including diverse families in their collection is a positive step towards this goal. Students need mirrors to see themselves, but more importantly, they need windows to understand, accept, and respect others.

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Appendix A
Interactive Read Aloud Lesson Template

Although the interactive read aloud and guided reading lesson templates described below share several similar features, they occur in different settings. In an interactive read aloud, the teachers retains the majority of the reading responsibility. During this time, the teacher models fluent reading and an important reading strategy. The students respond to comprehension questions, practice the reading strategy, and complete a reflection activity. In a guided reading lesson, the teacher selects appropriate texts for small groups of students, but the students gain more independence as readers. During this time, the teacher models a reading strategy and students practice this strategy as well as develop fluency and comprehension.

Teacher: Grade: Date:

Materials: This portion of the lesson plan lists all of the necessary materials to complete the lesson. This includes the reading material; the teacher may wish to list the title, author, and copyright year to keep records of the types of books included and how recently they were published. Teachers may also wish to list the family type portrayed in the book. The materials includes additional supplies that support the lesson such as pointers, sticky notes, picture supports, or graphic organizers.

Standards: This portion of the lesson plan includes the standards that the lesson supports. Teachers should use the standards and their professional training to guide their planning. Educators must create authentic activities that connect to both their students and their standards.

Theme of Reading Material: This portion of the lesson plan includes the author's message or a point of view statement that can be argued. The comprehension questions, activities, and student reflection prompts should relate back to the theme of the book.

Summary of Reading Material: This portion of the lesson plan reminds the teacher of important details from the book; this is helpful when teachers are planning the entire family unit; this will allow teachers to record why types of families they address. This section may include the setting, characters, and significant pieces of the plot.

Before Reading:
During this portion of the lesson plan, educators must accomplish three tasks. They must:

- Activate and assess prior knowledge. During this time, they must also develop background if necessary. This step is vital because students learn by connecting their schema to new information. Teachers can accomplish this through a thought provoking question, think-pair-share, anticipation guide, or an opportunity for students to draw what they know.
- Help students set a purpose for reading. This important step helps students focus while they listen to the read aloud. They may be asked to listen to find the answer to a question, to learn more about a topic, or to persuade someone after hearing the story.

- Teach vocabulary. Teachers should not use this time to define every challenging word, instead they should emphasize terms that are needed in order to understand the main idea of the reading. Teachers can accomplish this by asking students to act out words, reading the word in a sentence and encouraging students to use context clues, or showing pictures to illustrate the meaning of new words. Later as teachers read, they may model a strategy to determine the meaning of an unknown word.

During Reading:
During this portion of the lesson plan, educators must accomplish three tasks. They must:

- Teach a reading strategy. This is perhaps the most significant part of the lesson. During this time, the teacher should provide ample modeling and think alouds of the strategy. These strategies could include summarizing, predicting, visualizing, retelling, or making connections. At some point in the lesson, the students should also have an opportunity to practice this reading strategy.
- Ask comprehension questions. To ensure that students receive high quality instruction, educators should plan out their comprehension questions ahead of time. This encourages teachers to think about the purpose of the lesson and the most appropriate questions to achieve this goal. Teachers should include a variety of questions ranging from literal to inferential to synthesis to application to theme.
- Reflect on the literature. During this part of the lesson, the students should reflect on the reading by completing a creative or personal activity. This activity can happen during or after reading. This activity should allow students to see how the reading strategy helped them construct meaning. For example, teachers could model the reading strategy of visualization as they read; they could stop part way through the book and ask students to close their eyes and visualize a picture in their mind that matches the author's words. Students could then share their visualization with the class and the teacher could continue reading. Alternatively, the students could complete the reflection activity after reading.

After Reading:
During this portion of the lesson plan, educators must accomplish one task. They must:

- Include a meaningful activity that allows student to reflect on the literature. Teachers could accomplish this by using the literature as a model for writing. For example, students may reflect in a reader's notebook. In this way, students are extending their understanding of the text. Students may be provided with a writing prompt that relates to the reading strategy or a follow up question that prompts further reflection. During this time, the teacher should also connect to the students' understandings about the theme.

Appendix B
Guided Reading Lesson Template

Teacher: Students: (Group of students who will participate in the lesson)
Grade: Date:

Title/Author/Level of Reading Material: This portion of the lesson plan reminds the teacher of basic information about the selected book. This will also help the teacher group students by their reading level and anticipate any challenges based on the book's difficulty.

Summary of Reading Material: This portion of the lesson plan reminds the teacher of important details from the book; this is helpful when there are multiple rotating guided reading groups. This section may include the setting, characters, and significant pieces of the plot.

Theme of Reading Material: This portion of the lesson plan includes the author's message or a point of view statement that can be argued. Teachers should keep the theme of the book in mind as they create activities and plan comprehension questions.

Standards: This portion of the lesson plan includes the standards that the lesson supports. Teachers should use the standards, their professional training, and their knowledge of their students' reading levels to guide their planning. Educators must create authentic activities that connect to both their students and their standards.

Before Reading Strategies (Introducing)
During this portion of the lesson plan, educators must accomplish three tasks. They must:

- Activate and assess prior knowledge. During this time, they must also develop background if necessary. This step is vital because students learn by connecting their schema to new information. Teachers can accomplish this through a thought provoking question, think-pair-share, anticipation guide, or an opportunity for students to draw what they know.
- Help students set a purpose for reading. This important step helps students focus their reading. They may read to find the answer to a question, to learn more about a topic, or to persuade someone.
- Teach vocabulary. Teachers should not use this time to define every challenging word, instead they should emphasize terms that are needed in order to understand the main idea of the reading. Teachers can accomplish this by asking students to act out words, reading the word in a sentence and encouraging students to use context clues, or showing pictures to illustrate the meaning of new words.

During Reading Strategies (Reading and Responding)
During this portion of the lesson plan, educators must accomplish three tasks. They must:

- Teach a reading strategy. This is perhaps the most significant part of the lesson. During this time, the teacher should provide ample modeling and think alouds of the strategy. These strategies could include summarizing, predicting, visualizing, retelling, or making connections. As the students read, they should several opportunities to practice this reading strategy.

- Ask comprehension questions. To ensure that students receive high quality instruction, educators should plan out their comprehension questions ahead of time. This encourages teachers to think about the purpose of the lesson and the most appropriate questions to achieve this goal. Teachers should include a variety of questions ranging from literal to inferential to synthesis to application to theme.
- Reflect on the literature. During this part of the lesson, the students should reflect on the reading by completing a creative or personal activity. This activity can happen during or after reading. This activity should allow students to see how the reading strategy helped them construct meaning.

After Reading Strategies (Extending)

During this portion of the lesson plan, educators must accomplish one task. They must:

- Use the literature as a model for writing. For example, students may reflect in a reader's notebook. In this way, students are extending their understanding of the text. Students may be provided with a writing prompt that relates to the reading strategy or a follow up question that prompts further reflection. During this time, the teacher should also refer back to the understandings about the theme.